

Freedom of the Press

Guyana's constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, but relations between the People's Progressive Party (PPP) government and some media outlets have deteriorated in recent years. Defamation is a criminal offense that can be punished with up to two years in prison, and public officials have also utilized civil libel suits to stifle criticism. In 2010, then president Bharrat Jagdeo sued journalist and political activist Freddie Kissoon as well as the editor in chief and publishers of *Kaieteur News* for libel over a critical article, and obtained a preliminary injunction barring the newspaper from printing similar content. Hearings in the case began in late 2012 and continued in 2013. The courts had not rendered a final decision at year's end.

The 2011 Access to Information Act guarantees the right of access to information and requires government bodies to publish documents. It also calls for a commissioner of information to regulate data requests and releases. The first commissioner was appointed in July 2013, but there was no indication that the institution was functioning at year's end, and implementation of the law in general has been criticized as inadequate. Opponents have objected to a provision that exempts the president from the law's requirements; new concerns arose after it was announced that the information commissioner's office would be located at the office of the president.

A new Broadcasting Act went into effect in 2012. Although initially seen as an opportunity to extend media freedom and reduce government influence, the act has been widely criticized for its failure to advance either of those goals. It gives the president the power to appoint six of the seven members of the new Guyana National Broadcasting Authority (GNBA). President Donald Ramotar stacked the body with PPP insiders who had little or no broadcasting experience. The law authorizes the GNBA to issue licenses for private television and radio operators, but licenses have been denied to television stations operating in opposition strongholds. In late 2011, then president Jagdeo had controversially used executive power to grant radio licenses to friends and political allies before the new broadcasting regulations took effect. Strong opposition to that move continued throughout 2013, with some media operatives pursuing legal action to overturn the licenses issued by Jagdeo. The GNBA attempted to gain control of the controversy in October 2013 by conducting a reapplication process, and it issued licenses to nine of the applicants who had received them under Jagdeo.

Guyana has a vibrant, though threatened, opposition press. Several cases of censorship aimed at opposition-leaning media have been reported over the past several years. In 2013, a court decision to gag the *Guyana Times* regarding its reporting about the annual returns of a public company, and the resignation of three reporters from the Guyana Times/TVG media group, renewed concerns about press freedom. The reporters resigned to avoid possible reprisals for investigative articles and television segments about Glen Lall, the owner and publisher of *Kaieteur News*. There are occasional cases of attacks and harassment against journalists and media outlets, although no reports of physical violence emerged in 2013.

The government owns and controls the National Communications Network, which operates two radio stations and a television station and favors the ruling party in its coverage. At the end of 2012, Radio Guyana Inc., the first private radio station, began broadcasting. There are 23 television stations, most of which are in private hands. Including the government-owned daily, the *Chronicle*, Guyana has seven

national newspapers and six other periodicals. The majority of paid advertising appears in progovernment newspapers, including the *Guyana Times*, which is owned by a friend of *Jagdeo's*, and this affects the economic viability of opposition papers. *Kaieteur News* has opted to place government advertisements free of charge, and it is believed that this loss of revenue accounts for the paper's December 2010 decision to charge for access to its website. Use of the internet is not restricted by the government, and approximately 33 percent of the population accessed the medium in 2013.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Partly Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

34

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

10

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

13

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

11